

The Kid from Cologne

The Rise of Peter Florin, Soviet Citizen

Pankow's delegation to the Geneva Foreign Ministers' conference, the group which the SED declares will "represent the interests of the German people," may make the unique claim to being equipped with two foreign ministers. Next to Dr. Lothar Bolz, the official "Minister," stands the incomparably more vital and powerful Peter Florin, Chairman of the Foreign Policy Committee of the People's Chamber, and, more important, chief of the Foreign Policy Department of the SED Central Committee -- the political commissar of Pankow's diplomacy, insofar as one can speak of this function in a satrapy of the Kremlin.

For experts on Communist forms of government, the superior position of Florin, the party official, to "Minister" Bolz is a matter of course. For every ministerial position there exists a parallel supervisor and guide in the party leadership, and even the Communists do not trouble to deny it. Thus the "leading political scientist of the DDR," Dr. Herbert Kroger, remarked in 1954: "The party of the working class, the SED, is the leading power in all state organizations. Therefore no important measures can be taken by the state without prior decision of the SED...." Bolz has frequently had painful notice of the meaning of this sentence. When prominent guests came to East Berlin, he was allowed to show them around, but discussions were conducted either by Ulbricht himself or by Comrade Florin.

This boss of SED foreign policy is thirty-eight, and thus belongs to the young guard of the apparatus which Ulbricht has favored in the last few years. Florin is the same type of pliant Machiavellian functionary, dedicated to Ulbricht, as Erich Honecker (chief of the security department, SED Central Committee), Paul Verner (chief of the SED apparatus for Berlin), Gerhard Grueneberg (secretary of the Central Committee), and Willi Stoph (Defense Minister and Politbureaucrat). Florin has two distinct advantages over these competitors: he is a second-generation KPD leader, and he grew up in Russia.

"You were and remain one of our best," said Wilhelm Pieck at the Moscow funeral ceremonies for Peter's father Wilhelm Florin. This was not just the usual funeral flattery, for Wilhelm Florin had worked together with Pieck and Walter Ulbricht during the Great Purge against the other German emigrants in Moscow. Member of the Politburo after 1929, from 1933 on in Moscow, Wilhelm Florin never lacked the proper amount of servility toward Stalin and his two leading German proteges. Thus Peter Florin did not share the fate of some sons of former KPD leaders who, after their fathers' liquidation, were sent to the Vorkuta concentration camps. "The kid from Cologne", as Peter Florin was jokingly known by the inhabitants of the Hotel Lux, the emigrants' residence, was able not only to finish his education, but also to study chemistry on a state scholarship.

He became a member of the Communist youth organization, Komsomol, and - a mark of special favor - studied at the Comintern school. There he made good marks in the special technique of being a Stalinist apparatchik, i.e., combining the right mixture of ruthlessness and party loyalty. As a Soviet citizen, he spent a few weeks at the front in 1944 - for which he received the Order of the Red Star - until he was ordered back to Moscow for a more important task, to work on the newspaper of the so-called "National Committee for a Free Germany."

Party propaganda remained Florin's speciality when he returned to Germany in 1945. He took over the Communist newspaper "Freiheit" in Halle, Thuringia. But his big chance came in 1949, after the "DDR" had been founded, when he became chief of the most important department of the new Foreign Ministry, the department for relations with friendly (i.e. satellite) states. Florin was the only man in the Foreign Ministry who was allowed to reside in the special compound for government brass. This may have been partly due to the fact that he had married a Russian, Rebekka Mirova, whose father had once been an important figure in the Comintern. In 1954, Florin was made a candidate member of the all-powerful Central Committee of the SED. A year before, he had moved from the Foreign Ministry to the seat of the power behind it - the job as political director for foreign policy which he still holds. His success may be measured by the fact that he was elected a full member of the Central Committee in 1958. If Florin can continue to apply the arts he learned at the Comintern school, his future in the upper class of the classless society should be a bright one.